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Senate

On President Bush's State of the Union Address

Mr. President, I was joking earlier with the occupant of the chair, and I said I would like to be recognized so I could tell you what I thought of the President's State of the Union message last night. I appreciate the chance to offer some thoughts and comments.

First of all, the Presiding Officer may recall that when he kicked off his speech, he called for a return to civility. That is called for around here from time to time. Sometimes it is called for earnestly and other times it is something that we just say. I hope that it was offered in earnest and that all of us, Democrats and Republicans, will respond in like kind. I always found that in my old job in Delaware as Governor, I got a lot more done when we were civil to one another. Regarding the kinds of issues before us that the President talked about last night, if we are going to be successful, we need to do that.

One of things I have been calling for, for I guess about a year or 2 now, ever since the President laid out his Social Security reform initiatives, was the notion of, if we are making progress on something as politically explosive as Social Security reform, it would be helpful to go back in

time maybe 23 years to when President Reagan was President and Tip O'Neill was Speaker of the House. At the time, I was elected to the House of Representatives, where the Presiding Officer also served. In 1982, when I got there, we learned that Social Security was about to go bankrupt and that we needed to do something not to ward off the problem in 10, 15, 20, or 25 years but that next year, in 1983, because we were going to run out of money to pay benefits to our seniors. What President Reagan and Tip O'Neill did and maybe the Democratic leader of the Senate, who may have at the time been our colleague, Robert Byrd--I am not sure--they created a commission chaired by Alan Greenspan.

The members included people such as Senator Robert Dole, whose wife serves with us now, and Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan, now deceased. He was chairman of the Finance Committee, either then or at a later time. It also included Claude Pepper, from Florida, chairman of the Aging Committee in the House, and a number of other notable people. So Alan Greenspan chaired the Commission. They went to work in 1982

and came up with a whole raft of ideas. The Commission endorsed them in total.

We endorse all these ideas to raise revenues, to slow the outflow of spending from the Social Security trust funds. Because they embraced the ideas in total, it gave the rest of us cause to believe that maybe there is some merit to them.

Not only that, President Reagan said we are going to take the politics out of this. If you, the House and Senate, pass this package, I will sign it. Ronald Reagan, a Republican President, gave political coverage to the Democrats in the House and Senate. Tip O'Neill and the majority leader of the Senate gave political coverage to the Republicans. I describe it as drinking the Kool-Aid together, holding hands and jumping off the bridge together.

We passed a major overhaul of Social Security, and the President signed it into law. It put Social Security on firm footing, not just in 1983 but for a couple of decades to come. We know, looking down the road in 20, 30 years, we will have a serious problem with Social Security. The sooner we get started on it, the better off we all will be.

It reminds me a little bit of compounded interest. Save a little, and as time goes by, it adds up to a lot of savings. To the extent we can get started on Social Security sooner rather than later, it will help us more quickly than we might imagine.

As worrisome as the Social Security trust funds may be, the Medicare trust fund is an even greater, more urgent problem that needs to be addressed. I

was very pleased to hear the President say last night not only a blue-ribbon commission with an eye toward the boomers and their effect on retirement but also Medicare and Medicaid. As you know, more than half the money we spend in Medicaid ends up with senior citizens in long-term care facilities. So I think that was a very good thing.

Going back to the President's call for civility, a bipartisan approach, unless we have it, this kind of deal may see the light of day, but we will never make any progress on it. And, frankly, we need to make progress on it for the sake of our parents and for the sake of our children and grandchildren, some of whom are the ages of the pages sitting in front of me today.

The President also lamented the fact that we have this terrible addiction to imported oil and that we have to do something about it. That was great. In fact, when John Kerry was running for President, one of the centerpieces of his campaign was energy independence I think by 2020, or something such as that. The President echoed some of the same concerns last night in his speech. I welcome those. People on our side welcome them as well.

It is important we not just say the words but we go forward and make sure we fund the technology initiatives and other initiatives that will help make renewable energy a reality, not just biodiesel and ethanol, but that we do a better job than we are doing now on solar energy, wind, and geothermal.

The President also mentioned last night a new generation, not just encouraging more wind, solar, soy, diesel, ethanol,

and so forth, but he also called for a new generation of nuclear powerplants. I know people have concern about the waste, and we should, but I also think we ought to be smart enough to figure out in the next 10 to 20 years what to do with the waste, how to recycle and better control it and reduce the threat that someone will get hold of it and turn it into nuclear weapons. We are too smart a people not to solve that problem.

The President mentioned in his speech--I was kind of concerned by this--I think he said let's replace 75 percent of our oil dependence on the Middle East by 2025. I don't think all our oil comes from the Middle East. I think 60 percent is imported today, not all from the Middle East. A lot comes from other places around the world. To say we are going to reduce our oil from the Middle East is not good enough and I don't think good enough to do it by 2025. It is my hope that we can move up that timetable sooner and maybe eradicate not only our dependence on oil from the Middle East but from other places outside our borders as well.

The President talked about affordable health care. The cost of health care is killing our competitiveness as a nation. One of the reasons--not the only reason--but one of the reasons why GM and Ford are struggling, losing money, laying people off, and closing plants is the huge legacy costs they carry with their pensions and health care costs for their employees today and for people who are retired.

GM alone provides health insurance for about a million people--folks working in the plants and their families, people who used to work in the plants and are

retired. It is about a million people. Some folks describe GM and some of these auto companies as basically a health care provider that happens to build cars and trucks on the side. I know they say that with tongue in cheek, but it is not far off the mark.

A couple things the President mentioned I think made a lot of sense. One was electronic records. For a lot of people, it doesn't mean much. I will use an example.

We had hearings this morning on Katrina, a follow up to what went wrong and what didn't go wrong on the heels of Katrina in New Orleans. When most people were evacuated--and we spent a fair amount of time this morning talking in our hearing about the evacuation of people who were in nursing homes and how it didn't go well. A lot of times people who were in nursing homes ended up in places outside Louisiana. Frankly, the people who received them in other nursing homes and other hospitals did not have a clue what medicines these folks were taking, they didn't know what their lab tests were, they didn't know the condition they were in. They had no real record of their x-rays or their MRIs. Basically, all these older people were dumped in the laps of these nursing homes and hospitals outside the gulf coast. It was a mess.

Compare and contrast that with the folks who are veterans and are being cared for by the VA in VA nursing homes and hospitals in the same area. When they were transferred to their new sites and other States surrounding the gulf coast, going with them, figuratively and literally, were their electronic health records. When they ended up in a new

hospital or nursing home, the receiving entity knew they had the medical history of this veteran. They knew what medicines they were taking. They knew what their lab tests were, MRIs, x-rays. They had a running history of the health care provided to these veterans. The veterans had an electronic health care record.

We have a similar system put in place for active-duty folks in the Department of Defense. When I was in the Navy, we carried around manila folders that literally had our health care records. We would take them from station to station, base to base, as we were transferred. We don't do that anymore. Frankly, we do something similar to that in civilian life. We ought not do it.

My little State of Delaware is trying to provide something similar to that. It is called the Delaware Health Information Network. That would allow everybody in our State to have an electronic health record. If you go into a hospital or doctor's office, they can figure out a little bit about your health history and how they can provide better care for you.

We obviously need to do that for our country. The Congress and the President can do something to help that. It is not just money either. It is having standards so we are basically singing off the same sheet of music. People who go to a hospital in South Dakota, North Dakota, or Delaware can have standards that are interoperable, systems that are interoperable and using the same standards so we can get good care, better care because the folks receiving us know something about our medical history.

The President talked about health savings accounts. They are about a year or so old. He talked about ideas to make them better. I know not everybody is crazy about health savings accounts. I know it is not a silver bullet, but it is part of the solution to provide health care help for those who don't have health care insurance, which is about 45 million people. It is an option that we can try to improve.

I want to mention one last point. Here on the Senate floor not too long ago, I was with our colleague, Lamar Alexander from Tennessee. He is a very thoughtful guy. Senator Alexander shared with me an idea that grew out of the National Academy of Sciences. It is an idea of looking ahead and figuring out how we are going to provide job opportunities for children who are the same age as my children--15, 17, the age of these pages. I guess they are about 15, 16, 17 years old as well.

The folks at the National Academy of Sciences came up with this idea. Senator Alexander was good enough to give this to me, Mr. President. I don't know if you have seen this. It is titled ``Rising above the Gathering Storm." It is the executive summary, a quick read. I commend it to everybody. When I heard the President talking about his idea last night of making sure our young people coming out of our high schools are better steeped in math and science and making sure the people teaching in our schools can actually teach math and science--I think the President said double the investments in technology that lead to innovation. I said that sounds vaguely familiar to me.

As it turns out, it is basically in the recommendations shared with me by Senator Alexander that came out of the work done by the National Academy of Sciences. It is good stuff.

As we look forward, trying to figure out how we are going to be competitive with the rest of the world in this century, I am not sure we have all the answers. Part of it is, frankly, making health care more affordable for our people and employers. That is part of it. Part of it also is making sure our kids, our students, our young people who walk out of our high schools and colleges and go off into the world can read, write, think, they can do math, they know science, and are familiar with technology. There are a lot of good ideas in this publication, and I think the President has embraced this proposal and we, as Democrats and Republicans, might want to do the same.

P.S., sometimes we say things in speeches that sound good and a lot of people stand up and applaud and say: That is right, that is good, I like that. But the followthrough is not always there. It is important, if we are going to go down this road--and we probably should--that the followthrough be there.

What do I mean by that? The President is going to submit a budget proposal to us in about a week or so. It will be interesting to see how the administration funds these initiatives. When we go through the budget process, at the end of the day--we will adopt our appropriations bills later this year--it will be interesting to see how hard the administration pushes for these kinds of provisions outlined in the proposal from last night and from the National Academy of Sciences. It will be

interesting to see what the administration proposes next year and the year after that and the year after that and how hard they push for funding.

I will be watching, and to the extent the administration wants to support these proposals, I suspect they will have my support and probably the support of other Democrats and Republicans. It would be nice not just to hear words from the President but deeds as well.

I say to the Presiding Officer, I don't know how he felt about the President's speech last night. I didn't catch his interviews. I know he did them. I did them back in Delaware, and they don't cover much in South Dakota either or in Washington, for that matter. I heard encouraging things in what the President said. I wanted to mention those.

I will close. I know the Senator from North Dakota is waiting for me to get out of his way so he can take the floor as well. I will close with this. Just about every Member of the Senate has been over to Iraq in the last year or so. I was in Iraq in December. I met with our military leaders, I met with our civilian leaders, and I met with Iraqi military leaders and Iraqi civilian leaders. I was encouraged on several fronts.

It was just before they had their elections. It was encouraging we had so many people wanting to run for the parliamentary seats--275 seats and 7,000 candidates. That is a pretty amazing outcome in terms of participation, trying to put a coalition government together, stand it up, rewrite their constitution, build the economy. That is a whole lot to do at once in the middle of an insurgency.

One of the more encouraging comments I had was from GEN George Casey. We were talking about whether the Iraqis are able to stand up, take on more of the fight, cover the responsibilities geographically and otherwise. We got an encouraging report, not one that said we are going to be able to leave in 6 months, 12 months, or even 24 months. But in General Casey's words, what he said with reference to our presence in Iraq is it is time for us, the United States, to start moving toward the door.

Our President has said consistently that when the Iraqis are ready to stand up militarily, we, the United States, will be ready to stand down. He has been pretty consistent in saying that. What I heard from our own military leaders there, and the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff is that the Iraqis are able to militarily stand up in ways this year that they could not a year ago: Battalions can lead the fight, and there are some that can actually go out and fend for themselves; how the Iraqis control the border with Syria, control roughly one-third of Baghdad; have taken over a bunch of the bases where the United States used to be.

They are standing up, and as they stand up, at least in the words of our own military leaders, maybe it is time for us to head toward the door. The President said last night--this is almost a quote--those decisions as to troop level will be made by our military commanders and not by politicians in Washington, DC. I heard that last night.

Most people applauded, but I thought, what our military commanders in Iraq are telling me is that it is time for us to begin moving toward the door--not to

leave, not to close the door, but to begin moving toward the door.

I was a little disappointed last night. I think the President may have missed an opportunity to signal that we are in a position to begin reducing, to some extent, our troop presence there.

In a way, a perverse kind of way, what that is likely to do is, as the Iraqis move up and stand up and the other Arab nations come to support this new government in Iraq, in a perverse kind of way our beginning to reduce our presence undercuts the latent support the insurgency enjoys.

I could not understand why there is this latent support for the insurgency over in Iraq, but one of the reasons is when the Iraqi people hear--or at least a lot of them hear--our President say or us say we are there until we have complete victory, we are there for as long as it takes, what they hear is: The Americans are here for our oil, and they are not going to leave until they get it all or at least control it all. Hence this latent support for the insurgency.

I hope we will look for opportunities--not to pull out lock, stock, and barrel by the end of the year; that doesn't make any sense--we are going to be there for some time--but to find a way for us to be, in the words of one Iraqi I heard over there, less visible and less numerous. To the extent we are able to do that and they stand up and assume the new responsibilities, maybe we will be able to enable them to do a bit more with a bit fewer of us, which would please the American people; I believe it would please the Iraqi people; it would help reduce, a little bit, our budget deficit and

maybe actually promote the day when Iraqis are running the show on their own and making them proud and us proud of them.

I have gone on long enough. Thank you for the opportunity today to share some reflections from last night.

With that having been said, I yield the floor. I see my friend from North Dakota is ready to take the floor and say a few words.